

spending," the President of the United States puts defense and the men and women in the military on the same level as the IRS. The President is using our military—using our military—as leverage to fight a battle that the Defense authorization bill cannot accomplish.

At a time of mounting threats around the world, it is disgraceful. It is disgraceful the President would refuse to authorize for our troops the resources they need to prepare for and engage in vital missions around the world and that deliver some of the most significant reforms to the Pentagon in more than 30 years.

By vetoing this legislation, the Defense authorization bill, let's be clear what the President is saying no to. He is saying no to pay increases and more than 30 types of bonuses and special pays for servicemembers, saying no to more portability of military health plans and greater access to urgent care facilities for troops and their families, saying no to enhanced protection against military sexual assault, saying no to significant reforms to a 70-year-old military retirement system that would extend retirement benefits to over 80 percent of servicemembers, saying no to the most sweeping reforms to our defense acquisition system in nearly 30 years, saying no to a ban on torture once and for all, saying no to \$300 million in lethal assistance for the Ukrainians to defend themselves against Russian aggression, and saying no to countless other important provisions that are greatly needed to combat the growing threats we see around the world today.

Perhaps, most importantly, the President of the United States is refusing to sign a bill at a time when—as our top military commanders and national security experts have testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee—the world has not seen greater turmoil since the end of World War II.

So, my friends, here is the context. Thanks to the President's failed policies, the results of leading from behind, the results of a policy of "Don't do stupid stuff," we now see a world in a state of turmoil—the likes of which we have not seen since the end of World War II.

On a bipartisan basis, we passed a defense authorization bill that has monumental consequences to the future security of this Nation, the present security of this Nation, and the welfare and ability of the men and women who are serving this Nation and their ability to defend this Nation, and the President—because he wants an increase in domestic spending, has vetoed it.

Never have I seen such irresponsibility on the part of a Commander in Chief. There have been Presidents I have disagreed with. There have been Presidents I have had spirited debates with—but never ever in history has there been a President of the United States who abrogated his responsibilities, his constitutional responsibilities,

as Commander in Chief. I say shame on him today, and this is a shameful day.

The House will vote to override this veto on November 5. I strongly urge my colleagues to reverse this dangerous action and put the interests of our military and national security ahead of politics. Our men and women serving around the world, many still in harm's way, deserve nothing less.

I spend a lot of time with the men and women who are serving in the military, including members of my own family, and they are not uninformed. They are very intelligent. They watch what we do—we, their elected representatives. Their voters trust us to defend them, care for them, to give them the weapons they need, the benefits they need, and the care they need when the wounded come back. They rely on us. They are going to see, as we watch Vladimir Putin on the march, as we watch the success of ISIS, as we watch Ukraine being dismembered, as we watch China commit more aggression in the South China Sea and fill in islands—and now? Now this Commander in Chief decides that this is a time to veto an authorization bill because he doesn't think there is enough domestic spending. It is a sad day, a very sad day. It is a sad day for America but most of all it is a very sad day for the men and women with whom we entrust our very lives and our security. It is a sad day.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Washington.

VETERANS' ADMINISTRATION MEDICAL CARE

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, next month our Nation will pause to honor the millions of men and women who have fought for our freedom and worked to advance peace around the world.

Veterans Day is our annual way to say thank you and to honor those who have sacrificed so much on our behalf. While I would like to stand on the floor and say our country is doing everything we can for the people we owe the most to, that we are fulfilling the promise we made to them when we sent them off to fight for us, unfortunately that is not currently the case because our Nation is falling far short of its goal of honoring our veterans when it comes to VA care.

Despite a sweeping bill intended to tackle some of the most pressing problems and give the VA new tools and a change at the top of the VA more than a year ago, I continue to hear from veterans across my home State of Washington about care that is inconsistent, outdated, and often downright dismissive of individual needs. I have heard from a number of veterans in my home State of Washington who are waiting on surgeries, MRIs, oncology appointments, mental health screenings—you name it—and far too

often they say they are told it will be months to see a doctor or a specialist.

I bring their stories today, to this "other Washington," to continue to make clear this kind of outdated, inefficient care is unacceptable.

This is a pivotal time for our VA, and the demands on the system will only go up as wars continue to wind down and the Vietnam-era veterans continue to seek more care for the injuries and illnesses they suffer from. As the daughter of a World War II veteran, I refuse to let substandard care be the status quo. I won't accept long wait times, redtape, and understaffed hospitals as a reality for our veterans. I am not going to stop fighting to make sure we have a system that works no matter how long it takes, no matter how many obstacles we face, and no matter who is in charge at the VA.

The law we passed to give veterans more options for care has now had an opportunity to go into effect. We can see what is working, what is not, what we can build on, and what we need to tear apart.

Last year I supported the inclusion of an independent assessment of the VA health system in the Choice Act, and recently that assessment validated what we have been telling the VA for years: There is growing bureaucracy, and there are problems with leadership and staffing, and massive capital costs. While the independent assessment identified some bright spots in the VA system, it also found that care and patient experiences differ widely across the system and that best practices and important policies are not instituted across the country. That means we all have more work to do because we have a responsibility to our veterans.

Here is what we are up against. The VA still has multiple non-VA care programs, none of which talk to each other, none of which are coordinated. They all have different eligibility criteria, different procedures for patients and providers, and different reimbursement rates.

I hear frequently from veterans in my home State of Washington about how difficult the Choice Program has been. From VA staff who don't understand the program, to confusion about eligibility, to getting the runaround from contractors, veterans are sick and tired of having to fight just to get an appointment.

I hear how frustrating some of the bizarre rules and restrictions on Choice are. For example, an authorization for care only lasts 60 days. Well, if you are a woman veteran and you are pregnant, you are going to need more than 60 days of care.

At the VA, we are still hearing that the wait times are far too high. But with long wait times in the private sector and the burdensome process to even get into the Choice Program, veterans are finding they actually would have gotten care sooner if they had stuck with the VA. If the solution to the wait time problem takes longer than going to the VA, it is not working.

It is no wonder that veterans and providers alike turn their backs on the VA. The system is so complicated, it is impossible to get good health care.

It is time for the VA to implement one—one—non-VA care program for the future. As we now approach the end of this trial period for the 2-year Choice Program, the VA has to use this opportunity to finally get it right on non-VA care. It needs to design a new system that truly meets the needs of our veterans.

I believe that system must have five fundamental characteristics:

First of all, it has to be veteran-centered, with clear eligibility rules so veterans know what they can do and what they can expect and where they can go for what care and how that system works. It also means the experience for veterans trying to use the system has to improve. For example, veterans should never be turned away with a dismissive “We are not taking new patients.”

Secondly, it has to be easy for our providers, with simple and consistent procedures for them to deliver care, report back to the VA, and get reimbursed quickly. The contracting system needs to be simple and clear so that private providers can step in where the VA cannot.

Third, a new system must provide high-quality care that includes effective care coordination, and that requires that electronic medical records be returned to the VA. That includes oversight of the quality of care being delivered in the private sector. We have to know our veterans are being appropriately cared for.

Fourth, the new system has to be flexible enough to compensate for local needs, types of care where VA is deficient, or locations where the VA does not have a presence. Whether working with community providers to increase certain specialty appointments or seeing where the VA needs to move resources to hire more VA staff, the system has to maintain flexibility to adjust to new trends and new needs.

Finally, it has to be cost-effective for the VA and not shift the cost of care onto our veterans. Earlier this year, the VA nearly ran out of money, and they threatened to shut down the health care system. Well, we should invest whatever we need to to make sure our veterans are getting care. The new non-VA care system must be more efficient, and the VA needs to be clear with Congress about what it needs. Without a change, I would not be surprised if next year we don't find ourselves in the same position where we have underfunded the VA and need to come in and transfer funding to keep the VA operating. I will work with anyone and stand behind no one when it comes to getting veterans the funding they need.

Perhaps most important, when implementation begins, it simply must be better than what we saw with the Choice Program. VA staff have to be

trained and proficient, and third-party administrators in charge of the networks of private providers have to be efficient and responsive. Veterans deserve a system that works, not one that is torn apart and weakened over time.

So the answer isn't just to dismantle the VA and leave veterans to fend for themselves, as some proposals would do; the solution starts, finally, with a real conversation about what is going on at the VA, what the problems are, and then pursues an “all of the above” approach that finally strengthens the VA system, uses community providers to fill in the gaps where the VA cannot get the job done, and continues to make the best use of other Federal help programs, such as DOD and federally qualified health centers—all in an effort to truly build a veteran-centered VA health care system.

I stand ready to work with anyone to do this, and I hope my colleagues on both sides of the aisle will join me and not make this a Democratic or Republican issue. Veterans issues have never been partisan, and, in my mind, there is no place for that when we sit at the table to solve a complicated problem. I hope the administration is ready to fundamentally reshape this program. I hope bureaucrats who spend more time defending the broken system are ready to get to work implementing solutions built around the needs of our veterans. And I hope providers—those who work with the VA and DOD and TRICARE, as well as those who currently do not provide care to veterans—play a role to improve veteran care.

The wars may no longer lead the nightly news, but that doesn't mean the cost of these wars is gone too. Our veterans are still there, they still need health care and services, and we will not forget them.

I expect the VA to do better. Our veterans have already sacrificed so much. They should not have to come back and fight the VA to get the care they have earned. Let's act and let's do something that truly honors our Nation's heroes.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Wyoming.

Mr. ENZI. Mr. President, I want to thank the Senator from Washington for her very thorough and passionate explanation of the problems with the VA. It is time we got it straightened out. We have a new director because there was a problem. We gave them more money because there was a problem. We did the Choice Act because there was a problem. I think the VA is kind of fighting the Choice Act because they want to make sure they keep it within their own clutches. But it is time that we got it straightened out and that we got some action.

All of us are getting calls from veterans we should never get. We could go into a variety of them. But I would like to work with the Senator, and I appreciate the comments she just made. I

thought they were very bipartisan and very much needed.

Mrs. MURRAY. I thank the Senator very much.

GROWTH IN FEDERAL REGULATIONS

Mr. ENZI. Mr. President, it is often said that there are two constants in life—death and taxes—but I would like to add one more for your consideration: regulations. We often talk about the threat that America's growing debt poses to our economy and to our future, but the growth in Federal regulations also poses a serious threat to our Nation's long-term job creation and economic growth.

According to the Congressional Budget Office, or CBO, the potential growth rate of our economy—or the rate of growth that is possible given the education of our workers, the quality of capital equipment, and the business formation rate—averaged 3.3 percent for the period from 1950 through 2014. However, CBO expects that annual rate to fall 2.1 percent in the period of 2015 through 2025. That is a 36-percent reduction in the potential growth rate of the economy. Why is this so critical? According to the President's own Office of Management and Budget, a 1-percent increase in the economy's growth rate will yield more than \$400 billion in new revenues without raising taxes. Yes, that is according to the President's own Office of Management and Budget. A 1-percent increase in the economy's growth rate—we are talking about the private sector, not the government sector; the private sector is where the revenues come from—would yield more than \$400 billion in revenues without raising taxes.

We are always talking about the need for more revenues, but we are doing the opposite. The administration is doing the opposite of what it takes to get that growth to happen. When the growth rate falls, when we grow more slowly than we could and aren't meeting our full potential, government revenues also fail to keep up with budget projections. If we reduce by 1 percent, we lose another \$400 billion in revenues. So what happens when the government revenue comes up even shorter in the face of growing overspending? That results in more borrowing, and it results in bigger overspending and in expanded debt.

Senators from the Western States know all too well the economic effects of regulations coming out of bureaucracy-bloated agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency. Today I want to focus not just on the impact of recent regulations on my home State of Wyoming's economy but the drag they are creating on the economy nationwide. And at the same time, they are hiring ad agencies at billions of dollars to improve their image. They can improve their image just by doing their job without putting more burdens on the American people and eliminating jobs.